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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a year-long, college senior composition course based on nature writing and open to students from all content areas. Nature writing is defined as writing about nature with the specific requirement that the writer must remain true to the objective facts of nature while at the same time presenting the human response to, and the human relationship with, nature. The lecture and laboratory portions of the course are described and the course textbooks and required readings are listed. The first semester is described as a crash course in Western civilization, and the second semester as a synthesis of the techniques, elements of style, and modes of development that students have drawn from the writing models studied. The four modes of discourse emphasized in the course are explained (description, appreciation, interpretation, and persuasion), as are the exercises assigned to practice those writing modes. The following methods and objectives are said to be emphasized in the course: (1) connecting reading to writing assignments, (2) developing a critical writing distance that combines both informational and aesthetic stances, (3) writing assignments patterned to relate to the discourse modes, (4) extensive field trips to sites that motivate descriptive writing, and (5) peer critiques and guided revision sessions. (AEA)

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Nature Writing:
Giving Student Writing a Usable Tradition

The old idea is still around (and I think still valid) that reading good writing helps a student become a better writer by showing the student the possibilities of the language for eloquent expression, encouraging an expanded vocabulary, and providing models for both style and rhetoric. And of course reading can give the student something to write about.

These uses also have their problems, unfortunately. If the readings are belles lettres they do not offer direct models of expository writing. In this case the student can write only about the reading, writing as a critic, a completely different tradition with which the average student is little acquainted.

If the readings are from an essay anthology, the student may be confronted by an intellectually diffuse variety of topics, many of which are beyond that student's experience. The result is usually writing about the reading, or an artificial concoction of opinions synthesized only for the assignment.

An anthology focussed on one subject may provide topics for writing, and models, but such anthologies often lack a historical context. This may leave the student writing on "current events," or one current political viewpoint, again with insufficient background knowledge. As a further hazard, most composition teachers know the frustration of hearing a student excuse a poor grade on the ground that the instructor "didn't agree with my ideas."

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In each case, both instructor and student face the constant temptation to spend most of the class's time and energy talking about the reading, which is easy and fun, instead of doing writing, which can be hard work. Such difficulties have frequently prompted the planners of college composition courses to reduce or eliminate the use of readings.

The course I would like to tell you about offers solutions to these problems, and opportunities not usually available in traditional writing courses. This course, which I have taught at Colorado State University for the past three years, deals with nature writing. It is taught at the senior level. The students who take it come from a wide variety of majors, including forestry, the biological sciences, engineering, philosophy, art, the social sciences, and a few from English. All have completed the freshman composition requirement.

I do not describe this course on the assumption that all writing courses should be converted to nature writing, but rather in the belief that it constitutes an example, a model for teaching writing that might be adapted to a number of subject matter areas in which an historical tradition can be directly linked to the student's own writing and experience.

Perhaps the best way to begin is with a brief definition of what I mean by nature and nature writing. Nature in the purest sense is taken to be the natural world not controlled by human manipulation. In practice, this becomes a matter of degree.

Nature writing is, of course, writing about nature, but with very specific requirements: the writer must remain true to the objective facts of nature but at the same time present the human response to, and the human relationship with, nature. In a sense, this makes the nature writer responsible for both the requirements of the scientific writer and of the creative

writer, also. By this definition, the nature writer must take what Louise Rosenblatt calls the efferent stance (transmit information) and also the aesthetic stance. Neither dull, depersonalized objectivity nor romantic fantasy will do. The successful nature writer must deal with real human beings in a real physical world. Neither Bambi nor The American Journal of Botany can qualify.

In my nature writing course, this definition is applied with some rigor both to the literature to be read and to the writing done by the students.

The course is unusual in that it has both lecture and laboratory, two hours of each, each week, for a three-credit-hour course. The lecture time is spent studying the literary tradition of nature writing, primarily in England and the United States, although we do trace the roots back to ancient Greece and the Old Testament. The laboratory time is spent in writing, analyzing student writing, analyzing models of nature writing, and taking short field trips to generate common subject matter for writing assignments. Perhaps a brief description of the lecture and laboratory, respectively, will show how the course operates and what the students are able to gain from it.

Current textbooks for the course, used both in lecture and laboratory, are John Conron's anthology, The American Landscape, Loren Eiseley's The Immense Journey, Aldo Leopold's A Sand County Almanac, and Joseph Wood Krutch's The Desert Year. In addition, readings on reserve in the library include selections by Edward Abbey, Sigurd Olson, Sally Carrigher, and Ann Zwinger.

The lecture portion of the course is taught very much like a literature survey course, with heavy emphasis upon the cultural and intellectual history underlying the nature writing tradition. We begin by examining the

attitude toward nature, and toward the human relationship with nature, implicit in the Judeo-Christian and Classical traditions. From that we move quickly through the reports of Renaissance explorers (considering, among other things, what assumptions could lead them in all honesty to report some of the fictitious wonders about which they wrote). Always we keep before us the assumptions each age made about nature, and how these assumptions shaped what and how they wrote about nature.

The modern tradition of nature writing might be said to have begun with the eighteenth century, although in America the Puritans in the seventeenth century did much to establish ideas about nature that still affect our thinking. We consider the Puritans, the Deists of the eighteenth century, and the Romantics and the Realists of the nineteenth century, always through the medium of the nature writers of each age. Along the way we make connections with the scientific and philosophical thinking of each age on the one hand, and the art (particularly landscape painting) of each age on the other.

By the middle of the semester we have run through what amounts to a crash course on western civilization, and the students are ready to study nature writing in the twentieth century, beginning with the transitional figure of John Muir. With such a background, the students begin to see behind the writing of this century the assumptions and perceptions we have inherited from the past. When they read Krutch, they can hear the voice of Henry Thoreau. When they read Eiseley they begin to understand how a respectable scientist can have a mystical experience floating down the South Platt River. They become conscious of the complexity of human thought and human experience that underlies any good writing. And, wonder of wonders, they begin to realize that such complexity and richness can underlie their

own writing when it becomes authentic expression and not just mechanical fulfillment of a class assignment.

For the first half of the semester, the students do not always see the connection between what they are doing in lecture and what they are doing in laboratory, but midway in the course, when we begin reading modern nature writers and analyzing their work, not only as parts of a tradition but also as models from which the students can draw techniques, elements of style, and modes of development, the coherence of the course begins to dawn on them. At that point, they begin to learn to use, on their own writing, some of the analytical techniques we have employed in studying the tradition. For some it is the first time in their lives they have made any direct connection between what they are doing and history.

Two progressive frameworks are used in laboratory, more or less simultaneously. One progression is from the stance of personal expression by the writer through a gradual distancing of the writer from the work until the emphasis is less on personal expression and more on giving the reader a new experience of nature through the medium of writing. In achieving this progression we discuss such concepts as Keats's negative capability and Eliot's objective correlative. We consider ways in which we can, as writers, move from a fairly naive impulse to put our feelings into words, to a more sophisticated consideration of ways to create in the reader's experience a particular set of reactions. In short, we move from writing as a private behavior to writing as a social act directed toward others.

In the process, students learn to achieve critical distance from their own writing and to see it as something to be consciously crafted. When students can finally see their writing as an artifact to be shaped and polished for a purpose, rather than merely a blurting out of their

ephemeral feelings, then it is possible to teach them style and rhetorical technique. Then they can adopt a given point of view consciously, and create not a naive shadow of themselves but rather a persona to be perceived by the reader.

In the meantime, writing assignments also follow a pattern related to a set of modes of discourse. This set is somewhat modified from the traditional description, narration, exposition, and argumentation of Alexander Bain, but it is based on that well known quartet. The four we use, in the order in which we take them up, are description, appreciation, interpretation, and persuasion. As you can see, Bain's second element, narration, is replaced by appreciation, and his third, exposition, is called interpretation, really only an elaborated form of exposition. Finally, I prefer to speak of persuasion rather than argumentation because I try to teach my students non-adversarial modes of persuasive writing. Perhaps a brief description of what we try to accomplish under each of these headings will be useful.

We begin our laboratory writing with description. Our first exercise is to go together to a small picnic area on the campus -- "Sherwood Forest" -- to prepare two descriptions of the area. One is to be an objective, scientific description written in the style of a professional scientific journal. Such a description will give only factual data concerning size, location, apparent use, species of trees, birds, and mammals present, and so on. This will be the only "scientific" writing done this semester.

The second description is also to give any relevant objective facts about the area, but the speaking voice of the author is to play a part in this description. This description presents Sherwood Forest with the writer as a real, live human being perceiving the forest and reacting to it, rather

than as a dispassionate sensing instrument. In effect, the second essay is a description of the experience of being in Sherwood Forest.

As we work on the descriptions together, on the scene, we do various exercises in perceiving -- for example, concentrating on one sense at a time and making notes on the stimuli available to that sense. This can be a very useful set of exercises, because most of us are so oriented toward vision that we tend to neglect the other senses in writing description.

Among other goals, this exercise is intended to fix clearly in mind the difference between scientific writing and the kind of nature writing we will be doing during the semester. All the work on description is intended to encourage the student to perceive clearly, accurately, and in detail, with all of the senses, and to use that perception in presenting a fully human response to what is perceived. By that I mean that the writer is to describe not only from a physical viewpoint, but from an intellectual and emotional viewpoint as well. The scientific writer will tell the reader <u>about</u> Sherwood Forest. The nature writer ideally will give the reader a perception of Sherwood Forest.

After perhaps three laboratory sessions on description, in which we criticize each other's work, analyze brief examples of effective description, and revise in consultation and alone, we move on to the writing of appreciation. We have already begun including the observer in the description, but as we work our way into the writing of appreciation we begin shifting the writer's attention from expressing his or her own response toward creating in the reader a similar response. Such a response may include perception, emotion, evaluation, and it will require both efferent and aesthetic considerations.

In so presenting to the reader an experience that becomes the reader's, the writer inevitably uses both description and narration, thus adding the missing element from Bain's modes of discourse.

During the time we are working on appreciation, we use a laboratory period for a field trip to a small nature center along the Cache la Poudre River near the campus. The area is a wooded floodplain with a variety of vegetation, birds, and small mammals. This again gives the students a common set of experiences from which to write. This common familiarity with the general subject helps when the students are critiquing each other's papers. It also helps those students who have not had a great deal of outdoor experience feel more nearly on equal terms with those who have toured Glacier Bay in a kayak or climbed all the fourteeners in Colorado.

By the time the laboratory work has progressed to dealing with interpretive writing, the reading in lecture will have come up to the twentieth century. At that point, everything in the course begins to come together for the student. In the laboratory, the student has acquired skills in description, narration, and evoking appreciation. He or she can now bring those skills to interpretation, writing that combines rational understanding of processes and relationships with the experience of appreciation that is greatly deepened by understanding. The efferent and the aesthetic are both brought fully into play. Here particularly the writer must be true both to the objective, physical world out there, and also to the human consciousness perceiving it.

Again to assure that the students have direct experience from which to write, we devote one laboratory period to a trip to a small state park in the foothills just west of the campus. After a brisk hike up a steep trail we can stop and consider a panorama of mountains and plains. We can

see a variety of plant communities; we probably have seen some Abert's squirrels and their relationship with the ponderosa pine; there will probably be hawks sailing the thermals above the cliff faces; we may with luck encounter mule deer or a rattlesnake; and we get a fine view of the hogbacks created from the overlying sedimentary beds when the Rocky Mountains rose. All in all, we have plenty of topics for interpretive writing.

Finally, near the end of the semester, the laboratory work moves on to persuasion. I use this term rather than argumentation because I encourage students to see that a reader may be moved to action on an issue (the purpose of persuasive writing) through judicious use of all the techniques of writing we have been developing through the entire semester. Description, appreciation, interpretation all, when well done, can move a reader to action without necessarily having to take an argumentative stance. A reader who becomes aware of the beauty of a peregrine falcon, and who understands the role such falcons play in the biological community, will likely be persuaded to help save the peregrine falcon from extinction.

I do insist that the student write on a real issue with two arguable sides. Merely advocating beauty and truth is simple enough, but it doesn't achieve anything. Clear air or lower prices, a free-running wild river or a plentiful water supply -- those are the kinds of real choices facing environmentalists. Writing to advocate the choice of one desirable outcome over another, also desirable, outcome is more difficult than merely favoring "good" over "evil," but it is more responsible, and truer to the real world of human decisions.

As I have already suggested, by the middle of the semester the reading in the lecture has begun to relate very clearly with the writing in the laboratory. Not only do the students find, in that reading, useful models

for their own writing, but also by understanding the ideas and assumptions behind the works they are reading -- Krutch's transcendentalism, Leopold's ecological pragmatism, Abbey's dialectic -- they begin to become more aware of their own assumptions and to analyze them. In the vernacular, they begin to understand where they themselves are "coming from." This makes them both better readers and more perceptive and effective writers.

The net result of this course is intended to be a series of connections: perceptive reading connected to effective writing; a whole cultural tradition of the arts and sciences connected to a given individual's perception of the natural world; and most important, close ties, perhaps for the first time, among a student's own perceptions and experiences, that student's own writing, and an established and clearly understood literary tradition. History, philosophy, art are at last joined with daily experience.

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